

Consolidating Mindful Governance in the Kingdom of Bhutan

*Kinchho Tshering*¹

Introduction

As the last Vajrayana Buddhist nation in the world, Bhutan has been synonymous with “mindfulness”². Its alignment with economic development was witnessed in 1972 when the fourth Druk-Gyalpo (King) His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck was enthroned. Founded in an era categorised as “absolute monarchy”, governance was introduced with a cautious but holistic development trajectory which continues to thrive. The guiding philosophy for the interplay of politics and economics in the country’s governance came to be known as Gross National Happiness (GNH).

Today, the fifth Druk Gyalpo His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck, is Head of State of a “democratic constitutional monarchy”³ and GNH has assumed a renewed zest with the establishment of the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC).

Starting as a “one country two systems” Special Administrative Region (SAR), the GMC will evolve as a “diamond strategy”, with a democratic society eventually merging with an autonomous region. A key aspect of mindfulness is the involvement of all citizens in the process.

This article argues that the consolidation of a mutually conducive communication wave-length must be targeted between the two systems to achieve mindful governance outcomes. When linkages to the country’s mainstream economic development is sought, inclusive citizen involvement will be a key area of focus.

1 Kinchho Tshering is a former media professional, lecturer in political science, and currently a private entrepreneur.

2 The Eightfold path: a core teaching in Buddhism highlights ‘*Right Mindfulness*’ as one of the eight paths.

3 Article 1, (2), Kingdom of Bhutan. “The form of Government shall be that of a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy.”

Democratisation has been welcomed because the initiative came from above, but the elections have been characterised by political bickering and divisions along community lines. So “mindful governance” and “mindful society” require evoking political consciousness at the national level. Given that GMC is also a royal vision, there is every reason that the two systems will synchronise.

How will the Bhutanese polity navigate a mindful connection with the SAR? The country’s internal political milieu must first create conditions for mindful dialogue exchanges. This article on “mindful governance”⁴ within Bhutan seeks a vantage for a mindful connection between the two systems.

It investigates, in brief, the grey area of “political ideology”⁵ in Bhutan and attempts to decipher two key aspects of this journal’s theme of mindfulness.

1. As a catalyst for comprehensible exchanges between the electorate and political parties/candidates.
2. To encourage voters to elect a government with mindfulness.

Setting the Ideology Context for Bhutan

Bhutan’s decade and a half democratic journey shows the need for quality and not quantity in party manifestos, which interestingly also translates as an opportunity for mindful governance inquiry.

As the country anticipates a link with the “diamond strategy”, a positive upheaval that transforms and potentially ramifies political discourse can be foreseen. This section attempts to contextualise “mindful democracy” within Bhutan’s socio-cultural setting, and to deconstruct the political and economic narrative of ideology relevance in the context of GMC.

4 Mindful governance, often used in the context of corporate governance, involves a conscious and attractive approach to decision-making and oversight, focusing on the impact of decisions on all stakeholders. One key parameter is ‘Fearless Engagement’ which involves actively engaging with stakeholders and being open to diverse perspectives.

5 Political ideology is a coherent set of beliefs and values that provides a framework of understanding politics and society.

The Political Context

Globally, “the rise of right”⁶ wing parties which emphasise nationalistic sentiments is visible in the world’s bigger democracies, like the United States (US) with the Republican Party and India with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), reflecting the choices of voters under the “majority theory”⁷, a primary element for democracies.

Electoral mandates of political parties, in both developed and developing countries, tend to revolve around policies targeted at creating better jobs and wages, and the promise of better livelihood. The goals are similar but the paths chosen differ.

There is the potential to create mindful governance scenarios in the context of Bhutan. With the GMC in sight, the messages can be simply re-aligned with purpose. “Mindful governance” should be defined with clarity. Political discourse in the context of the diamond strategy can eventually be aligned.

The Economic Context

Where do Bhutan’s various political parties align, in terms of economic visions, in the “political spectrum”⁸? GNH is sometimes misinterpreted as distancing itself from economic growth. Yet, it is not the case. Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay’s remark provides clarity:

“My country is not one big monastery populated with happy monks..... The reason we are thriving is because we have been blessed with extraordinary Kings. Our enlightened monarchs have worked tirelessly to develop our country, balancing economic growth carefully with social development, environmental sustainability and cultural preservation, all within the framework of good governance. We call this a holistic approach to development GNH ” (Topgay, 2016).

6 “The rise of the right” generally refers to the increasing popularity and influence of right-wing political parties and ideologies, particularly in Western Democracies.

7 Majority theory, in political science and social science, generally refers to the principle that decisions should be made based on the preferences of the majority.

8 Political Spectrum is a way to understand and categorise different political ideologies and positions.

It is interesting to note the country's GDP forecast for 2025 is at a progressive 8.5% for 2024-2025, highest in South Asia.⁹ It is also a top government bit-coin holder that diversifies its economic threshold, while expansion under the Druk Holdings and Investment (DHI) arm is still being explored.

While every election witnessed a change in the ruling government, what remained constant in the politics and economy of the country is the presence of GNH, irrespective of varying political manifestos.

Given that GNH is broad and requires unravelling of layers in political science terms to reach conclusive findings, the next section acknowledges GNH in the politics and the economy of Bhutan and explores the positive reinforcing characteristics for the country.

Cross Analysis of GNH and Political Ideology

His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck has said: “GNH is simply development with values”. Over time, GNH has established a robust scientifically backed framework of pillars, domains, and indicators to provide a mindful development narrative for Bhutan.

Varying development ideas for the country by political parties tend to revolve around GNH. As this unique developmental approach caught on, countries began promoting sustainability and the pursuit of happiness as an equally important parameter for developmental aspirations and goals.

“The General Assembly of the United Nations in its resolution 66/281 of July 12, 2012, proclaimed March 20 the International Day of Happiness. The resolution was initiated by Bhutan.”¹⁰ This has showcased, to some extent, a powerful ideological prowess of the country. If that is the case, promoting GNH as an ideology could be a way forward.

While rapid deforestation is global, Bhutan has maintained a minimum of 60 percent forest cover, enshrined in its Constitution. Secondly, it has

9 Asian Development Bank. (2025). Asian Development Outlook April 2025. Retrieved: <https://www.adb.org/where-we-work/bhutan/economy?page=2>

10 United Nations. International Day of Happiness. Background. Retrieved <https://www.un.org/en/observances/happiness-day>

managed industrialism through robust policy frameworks, supported by a huge forest cover. Both are examples of “mindful governance”.

Because political dialogue is targeted towards mindful governance outcomes within the country, the government of the day will be responsible for delivering what GMC proposes for Bhutan’s political, social, economic and cultural evolution. This suggests that this reflective process of mindfulness balances GNH with the SAR mindset.

As the nature of Bhutanese political parties evolve, the party manifestos with GNH elements, and SAR with its own corporate governance culture, will cross roads.

The cross analysis of GNH and political ideology displays possibilities, and the GMC can opt to be a medium of connection with the country. In both scenarios, implications of GNH on political ideology showcase positive reinforcement.

As Bhutan navigates a “post-modernisation”¹¹ scenario culminating in GMC, quality exchanges between the two systems is imminent for mindful governance outcomes. After four rounds of elections and with a regional population demography imbalance for “274,967 (urban area) and 452,178 (rural area)”¹², political ideology in mindful governance terms must resonate with both sections of society.

Recommendations

Political Mindfulness

Philosophical grounds for policy framing by political parties lead towards descriptive political party positioning. Without ideological backing, it continues to exhibit conversational narratives and becomes more of a “beauty contest”.¹³

11 Post-modernisation refers to the societal shift following modernisation, characterised by a questioning of modernist ideals, a focus on fragmentation and diversity, and a scepticism towards grand narratives and universal truths.

12 National Statistics Bureau. (2025). Table 1.1: Key Demographic Indicators, 2017. “Statistical Yearbook of Bhutan: 2025.” Retrieved: <https://www.nsb.gov.bt/publications/statistical-yearbook/>

13 Personal communication with former secretary of Ministry of Information and Communications, Dasho Kinley Dorji on the eve of an approaching 2018 elections.

One of the pillars of GNH is “good governance” and the mindful application of it translates into mindful society. This paves the way for inclusive mindful governance.

For a country of 784,043¹⁴ people, the number of political parties indicates political campaign choices. When given too many options, the “paradox of choice”¹⁵ could potentially hamper the quality of political discourse. A key idea of mindfulness is to remove clutter and bring calmness and clarity.

The Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) should aim for quality, not quantity, in the country’s primary election phase. Given that political election agendas in the future will incorporate plans for collaboration with GMC, a natural phenomenon of political mindfulness takes shape.

Economic Mindfulness

Allocation of finances where it matters the most, in this case mindful political parties, complements economic mindfulness. Given that the State, by law, is mandated to fund elections in Bhutan, the national exchequer¹⁶ is expendable to the extent that political parties meet criteria for registrations.

Recently, students from the Gyalpozhing College of Information and Technology (GCIT) developed a block-chain-based voting system called the National Digital Voting. “The web-based system allows eligible voters to cast their votes regardless of their location. The system ensures inclusivity, transparency, and cost efficiency in elections.”¹⁷ This has brought relief to voters and overall national economic implications, as voting is an expensive affair.

A key economic transformation that can be hypothesised with the GMC is the culmination of a digital asset economy for Bhutan. What economic ideals best resonate for the country must be succinct when political parties campaign. Liberal, conservative, socialist and communist ideals vary in

14 National Statistics Bureau. (2025). Retrieved: <https://www.nsb.gov.bt>

15 “Paradox of choice” arises when individuals face an overwhelming number of options, leading to decision-making paralysis, anxiety, and ultimately, dissatisfaction with the chosen option.

16 Chapter 15, Public Campaign Financing, Section 277: Election Act of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2008.

17 BBS. (2025, June 13). Young Innovators at GCIT use AI and Block-chain to tackle everyday challenges, develop 40 projects. Retrieved <https://www.bbs.bt/229695/>

tone and notions for processes of shared benefits arising from it. Such hypothesis of economic ideology application creates options, like tourism, one of the “five jewels” of Bhutan’s economy — “what we notice is that the role of the State in the regulation and provision of tourism varies a great deal” (Webster & Ivanov, 2016).

Mindful Political Culture Evolution

“Change is the only constant” — Buddha

Bhutan’s transformation, driven with the force of meritocracy, is among the key words that describe the Bhutanese intent for progress.

For a Buddhist country, it is not only culturally significant but technically relevant to seek a “middle path”.¹⁸ Buddhist principles continue to weave their 21st century political, social, economic and cultural fabric and are aligned with broader political discourse. However, “religion remains separate from politics in Bhutan.”¹⁹

Ideology fills this void. For advancement of its political culture, it is vital for the country to open up and actually be part of the possibilities of the GMC being formulated in the minds of political parties.

When the governance culture of the country introspects on its own identity, its role in the bigger picture for the nation, it enhances cultural integration with initiatives like the GMC. Inclusive mindful governance therefore entails a change of mindset for quality connection with politics of the country, balanced with science. Both must opt for gradual exchanges in respective terms, conditions and space. Ideology politics also projects an alternative image for the country, alongside GNH.

18 “Middle Path” may be misunderstood as equivocal. In fact Buddhism is not as such. “Middle” means neutral, upright, and centred. It means to investigate and penetrate the core of life and all things with an upright, unbiased attitude.

19 Article 3. (3). Spiritual Heritage. “It shall be the responsibility of religious institutions and personalities to promote the spiritual heritage of the country while also ensuring that religion remains separate from politics in Bhutan. Religious institutions and personalities shall remain above politics.”

Gradual Positive Social Ramifications

Bhutan, particularly post-Covid-19, is experiencing many reforms, and one prominently seen is the GMC. Therefore, as the main catalyst to propel Bhutan's next development story, the social structure must open up to connect with the SAR concept. As the GMC also seeks to prevent “brain drain” for Bhutan, what Bhutanese are willing to do with vigour and passion working abroad, citizens of all ages must aspire for the same outlook within.

How would Bhutanese mindfulness evolve if there are no minds domestically to tap into in the first place? Equally, social media's grip on the country can be positive, enabling social change in the country's politics and development, when ministries use them for online partnership with citizens. A social connection with political parties should not be limited to elections, but continue to resonate without a timeline.

Conclusion

The linkage — a country's governance ideology (politics) and development (economics) trajectory — takes a path towards the Druk Journal's theme of Mindful Governance, Mindful Society calls for inclusive participation of all stakeholders. This is the core of good governance.

The first positive step towards mindful governance must take root at a conceptual level. Our changing life-style and the notion of time-bound five-year term governments need to be protected by ideological considerations in the electoral process. Ideology instills credible political language. It invigorates political discourse.

As the country grapples with a meritocratic culture, Bhutan's ability to imbibe the SAR transformation must begin with its citizens' ability to absorb higher quality political manifestos.

As technology and the information revolution has encompassed the country's development culture, the mind must be subsequently renewed with fresh new ideas, in this case ideology. Efforts to this end demonstrate potential mindful connection with the GMC which will influence the country's local, national and international perspectives.

Ideology, backed by science, paves the way forward for mindful governance outcomes.

Bhutan's political narrative will, some day, characterise the theory and concepts of political science. This is something which the country and the "one country two systems" can nurture.

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